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COMMERCIAL BOOKBINDINGS

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH, WITH SOME MENTION OF AN EXHIBITION OF DRAWINGS, COVERS, AND BOOKS, AT THE GROLIER CLUB, APRIL 5 TO APRIL 28, 1894

NEW-YORK
29 EAST 32D STREET
1894

COMMERCIAL BOOKBINDINGS

book besides the Bible had become a prevailing fashion among the great mass of the people, the publishers led sedate and well-ordered lives, getting out new editions of the classics once in a while, and printing such new volumes of poems, fiction, essays, history, and sermons as commended themselves to their minds. These books were bound in plain boards which served to protect the pages until the edition was sold, when each purchaser might have his book bound to please himself, after the fashion of the times. Nobody thought of expecting the publisher to throw in a fine suit of clothes with the book; if the buyer were a rich person, wearing fine clothes himself, he might choose to put all his books into a sort of distinctive livery, so that they would stand up on his shelves in sedate silence, like so many more footmen in the house.

The spread of the reading habit made a vastly wider field for the publishers' work, and they proceeded to get out books literally "by steam," and in numbers which overthrew all traditions of the trade. Competition did its share, doubtless, to spur the ingenuity of each publisher to invent a plan by which he could sell more books than his rival. Now when a publisher says that "the cover sells the book," he means, of course, not that the author has no chance at all, but merely that the attractive cover commends the

book to the middleman, or retailer, who puts the book made agreeable to the eye in a conspicuous place in his stock, where the customer sees it easily, is attracted, examines it, and (if the inside is as good as the outside) buys it in preference to another book just as good, but less tastefully bound. And so came the sprout of the revolutionary idea of making a commercial binding which should be something more than merely utilitarian — which should have some esthetic excellence of its own. One day, some idealist among publishers conceived the notion of binding a new book just issuing from his press in cloth covers which should be comely and appropriate enough to be allowed to remain on the book as its proper and enduring cover. Who did it, and where it was done, nobody seems able to say certainly; but it may fairly be guessed that it was in England, and scarcely more than thirty years ago. The spark of this luminous idea kindled instantly, and spread quickly to America, where the art of making ornamental cloth book-covers has now reached a fuller development, perhaps, than anywhere else in the world. The ingenuity of Americans in devising special machinery for the work is doubtless the moving cause of this result, which ingenuity has been stimulated by the great demand in this country for cloth bindings. At present, scarcely a French or English machine

is in use; Yankee wits have surpassed all their rivals.

But in making any chronology of ornamented commercial book-covers it is evident that there may be no sweeping assertions as to the exact date of the origin of the species. When it is said, as just now, that the fashion began about thirty years ago, even though the work then done was pitifully crude, certain exceptions must always be noted. We may go back as far as you please, bearing in mind that all commercial covers are comparatively modern, and still find occasional examples of commercial covers bearing some evidence of attempted ornament.

Reviewing briefly, then, we see the first commercial binding in boards. Sometimes paper sides were imposed upon the boards, and a paper label was usually pasted upon the back. Such binding was very shaky, and a stronger material was found in a thin, tough cloth called bookbinders' muslin, though the paper label bearing the title was still affixed to the back of the book. In the search for novelty and improvement, somebody discovered that gold-leaf would adhere to paper and to the muslin; so it came about that paper, muslin, and sometimes leather title-labels were stamped in gilt and fastened to the backs. Among the earliest examples of this treatment is the 18mo edition of Byron's works,

published by Leighton & Hodge nearly sixty years ago, which has a title-label bearing a shield and lettering stamped in gilt. No very general progress from this treatment was made for several decades; the important transition to stamping covers in ink and combining black and colored inks with gold does not appear until between 1865 and 1870. The first step toward such work was the use of blind stamps upon cloth covers, and the occasional making of elaborate designs in gilt. Examples of such treatment are to be seen in the books published between 1845 or 1850 and 1860. About this time the "blue-and-gold" editions of various poets were hailed rapturously as novelties of the most "elegant and refined" character, and the fashion died hard.

As average examples of American progress in the making of commercial covers, let us consider a few books chosen at random from a very miscellaneous collection, and examine them in the order of their dates. The first is entitled "Williams's New-York Annual Register for 1835," and was published by Edwin Williams, 41 Cortlandt street, and printed by James Van Norden, 49 William street. This has a red-leather back, stamped and lettered in gilt, and board covers upon which printed paper sides are pasted. The front cover shows the title and the printer's and

COMMERCIAL BOOKBINDINGS

corner. This book was published in 1872, and since then the art of designing ornamental covers has flourished like the bay-tree; yet it is doubtful if any more popular cover has been made. It seems exactly suited to its use.

Four years later, in 1876, was published the next book among those chosen as in some sense types. This is an edition of "The New Day," by Mr. R. W. Gilder, which has a purple cloth cover stamped in gold with a peacock's feather, the color showing through the gold lines with an iridescent effect quite realistic. During the succeeding decade the art progressed gradually, and in 1884 appeared an edition of Lang's "Ballades and Verses Vain" in a smooth blue cloth cover stamped in gold. This smooth blue cloth, both plain and with gold stamps, appealed strongly to the taste of many publishers, and seemed to catch the fancy of the general public — that bench of last resort. Admirable as this cover is, it lacks the originality of many later covers, for the gilt stamping is seen to be merely a transferring to cloth covers of the decoration given to leather covers, the cloth being made imitative of leather in smoothness and solid coloring.

The distinctive quality of the modern cover of fancy cloth is clearly seen in the last of the books chosen as indices of progress in the art. This is "My Lady Pokahontas," published in

1885. The cover is of brownish drab cloth, its front side stamped in brown ink with the title and with a reproduction of an old portrait of Pokahontas, flanked by two conventionalized tobacco-plants. Here is a cover carefully designed as appropriate in soberness of general color and material to the subject-matter of the book, which is "a true relation of Virginia, writ by Anas Todkill, Puritan and Pilgrim." The use of leaves of the tobacco-plant as minor decorative details shows a nice sense of proportion and fitness. And this cover is not overloaded; in itself a special excellence. For one of the greatest snares for the feet of the designer of a book-cover is the tendency to drag out every idea from inside the book and spread it upon the outside. Some of these ladies and gentlemen would have the cover tell the whole story, as if it were a headline in a newspaper; they weigh down the cover with symbolism until they are likely to drown the book.

It is less than twenty years ago that it occurred to anybody to enlist the services of an artist in designing commercial covers. Before that time, no publisher ever thought of such a thing, but depended on his binder for designs. The binder, in turn, was practically dependent on his die-cutter, and between them they produced such designs as they could, usually giving the publisher a choice of two or three. Though special

and continual efforts were made to improve the general appearance of covers from about 1865, it was not until 1875 or 1880 that artists' designs were used in any appreciable numbers. One of the very earliest instances of an artist's work on a cover is the first edition of "The New Day," referred to before; and here, even, the cover design was simply reproduced from a decorative motive employed to illustrate the text.

If one try to set down the formula for a perfect commercial book-cover, he is likely to find that authorities differ. At the beginning, all consent that the colors of the cloth used must be well related to the general character of the book, and, in some degree, to the surroundings in which it will probably be placed; and these colors, moreover, must be suited to the various ink-stamps which are to be applied, and to gilding. Gold-leaf, however, is something like a standard gold coin; it passes current everywhere. When applied with any degree of taste, gilding is acceptable as a decorative material upon any book-cover, no matter what the material or the color upon which it is imposed.

But with inks it is different, and the would-be designer of a commercial cover must remember that his design must be practical, first of all. The artistic fancy is apt to be impatient of restraint, either in space, form, or color; and many

a design, beautiful as you please in itself, has failed to appear on a book-cover, simply because no human being could reproduce it satisfactorily in large quantities by mechanical means. There is next to no chance for handicraft in turning out hundreds of covers — it is work by machine. It is the habit of artists to deny that anything really good or beautiful can be done by machinery, but in view of the admirable results attained along this line of work, the pedigree "by artist out of machine" must surely be admitted to be honorable.

Keeping the practical necessities steadfastly in view, then, the artist designs his cover after his own conception of what is best. Sometimes he reproduces classical outlines entire; sometimes he makes convenient combinations of antique and modern decoration — distrusting the impulse to symbolism; sometimes he draws upon his imagination. It is impossible to say, broadly, what plan is best; the personal equation must be reckoned. But experience has shown that in most cases that designer is most efficient who relies upon reproduction and combination of pure ornament. Just here lies the root of the special success of book-cover designers who have had architectural study and training. The architect must have a good sense of form and proportion; his design is well balanced, and seems to fit the

cover; he works well within boundary lines; his ideas in the selection of ornament are purer and surer. He has learned that a design which is beautiful as a dream in the delicate water-color sketch, on paper of just the proper tone and texture, may be utterly impossible to reproduce in the open air under the laws of the Building Department. So he adjusts himself more readily to the mechanical restrictions of the commercial book-cover; his instinct is more swiftly practical.

Perhaps it is the delicacy and compactness of the artist's work required for this purpose which has tempted so many women into the field. The pioneer of designing for modern cloth covers is a woman — Mrs. Sarah M. Whitman, of Boston, to whose skill and taste are due many if not most of the charming covers with which Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. adorn their publications. The covers of "Egypt," "Two Worlds," a new edition of "Evangeline," and Miss Guiney's "A Roadside Harp" are good examples of her skill.

Among the large number of capable women now doing this work it may be almost invidious to select a few names. But besides Mrs. Whitman's designs it is proper to speak of the beautiful work done by Miss Alice C. Morse, who made the very tasteful cover of "Sweet Bells Out of Tune," published by the Century Company, and

the striking and popular covers of the Odd Number series published by the Harpers. Miss Morse designed the fine cover of "Marse Chan," and also made the beautifully simple design for the cover of Stevenson's "Ballads."

Another woman designer of great versatility and eminent skill is Miss Margaret Armstrong, whose work is to be seen upon the covers of many of the daintiest books published by the leading houses in New-York and Chicago. Miss Armstrong has special facilities for study of the best models in classic and later ornament, and her skill in adapting, combining, and creating designs which are almost flawless in excellence has made her book-covers famous. As examples of her style one notes the covers of Mrs. Van Rensselaer's "Art Out of Doors," Arnold's "Adzuma," and Anne Reeve Aldrich's "Songs about Life, Love, and Death." It would be an easy and grateful task to extend the list.

Of the men who are more or less widely known as cover designers, perhaps Mr. Stanford White may be mentioned first as a convenient exemplar of the assertion that an architect is pretty sure to make a good book-cover. His treatment is broad and dignified, and his covers are as excellent constructions as his façades. Notable examples of his work are the covers of the "Century Dictionary," the "Book of the Tile Club,"

"Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," and of "Scribner's Magazine."

Mr. George Fletcher Babb, whose new cover for the "Century Magazine" has received unqualified praise, also designed the cover for "Sport with Rod and Gun." Also an architect, Mr. Babb makes fewer sketches for book-covers than other designers, but his work is always admirable. Mr. George Wharton Edwards is an illustrator whose cover designs have a strongly individual touch. The cover of "The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson" has been called the best thing he has yet done; but the clever use of conventionalized tulips on the cover of his own "Thumb-Nail Sketches" shows how symbolism may charm rather than offend.

Among the designers of important covers is Mr. Harold B. Sherwin, who made the cover sketches for "Old Italian Masters," "The Women of the French Salons," and the "Century Gallery." To mention only one of Mr. Walter Greenough's charming designs, his cover for the Scribner's Cameo series has all the graces of delicacy and simplicity to recommend it.

Mr. Edwin A. Abbey supplemented the beautiful illustrations which he made for "She Stoops to Conquer," and for the poems of Herrick, by drawing the covers for these luxurious books.

Mr. Elihu Vedder reproduced one of his illustrations to the "Rubáiyát" upon the cover of that handsome quarto. Mr. Walter Crane's peculiar felicities of design are seen to advantage upon the cover of Hawthorne's "Wonder Book," and on that of "The Old Garden," by Margaret Deland.

Mr. Kenyon Cox occasionally designs a book-cover, so does Mr. Will H. Low, and so does Mr. Alfred Parsons. It has become fashionable among writers nowadays to illustrate their own books, and, indeed, some artists make sketches and write a sort of framing text to go with them; and such books are apt to have covers designed by the artist whose picture-book it is. Conspicuous among such covers are those done by Mr. F. Hopkinson Smith, Mr. Howard Pyle, Mr. Palmer Cox, and Mr. William Hamilton Gibson.

Much of the detailed mention of designer and designs just made has been suggested by the present exhibition of commercial book-covers at the Grolier Club, which is the first show of its kind ever made by this association of bibliophiles. They manifest the catholicity of their taste by this acknowledgment of the certain place, albeit a lowly one, which modern commercial bindings have made for themselves even in the presence of the greatest special bindings of earlier days.

The Aldine Club made an exhibition of commercial covers some two years ago, at its house in Lafayette Place, which was full of interest; and other exhibitions of cover designs have been made, incidentally, from time to time in recent years, by various societies for the advancement of decorative art, notably by the Associated Artists, and the New-York School of Applied Design for Women.

The Grolier Club has tried to make this show as comprehensive as possible in the short time allotted for its preparation; and while much thought and labor have been expended in the attempt to give representation to the most conspicuous branches of this modern work, yet the Club feels that in so complex an undertaking, a great deal has been left undone, and hopes that its work may be judged as in some measure experimental.

Although, in the main, the mention of covers and designers made in this sketch has particular reference to the work shown in this exhibition, it has been manifestly impossible to speak of everything in the cases, or even of many covers and designs specially interesting and praiseworthy. It may easily be the fact that, in some instances, the most representative work of certain designers is not shown. It is certain that there are scores of covers whose designers have not been mentioned

at all, particularly in the collection of imported books.

Besides the exhibits already noted, one will observe Mr. Harold Magonigle's cover for Sir Edwin Arnold's "Potiphar's Wife, and Other Poems," Mr. Reginald Birch's design for Mrs. Burnett's "The One I Knew the Best of All," Caldecott's decoration of the cover of "Bracebridge Hall," Schweinfurth's brilliant archæological design upon the cover of "The Oregon Trail," Holloway's sympathetic treatment of "Through Colonial Doorways," Ross's fine cover for Mrs. Van Rensselaer's "English Cathedrals," and Mr. Otto Toaspern's dainty cover for the Harpers' Black and White series,— a design of attractive simplicity. In many cases (as, for instance, with the admirable design of Gothic tracery stamped upon the soft brown leather binding of Mr. Montgomery Schuyler's collection of architectural studies), the Grolier Club has been so unfortunate as not to obtain the names of the designers, although this detail of information has been specially sought.

Certain covers, among all those shown at this exhibition whose designers' names have not been learned, seem to deserve special mention. Such are the designs for Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," Oscar Wilde's "Poems," new editions of Dobson's "Ballad of Beau Brocade" and

"Proverbs in Porcelain," Michael Field's "A Book of Verses Underneath the Bough," the large edition of George William Curtis's "Prue and I," Charles Vickerman's treatise on "Woollen Spinning," and Elizabeth Rosevean's essays on "Needlework, Knitting, and Cutting Out."

An interesting feature of this exhibition is the case in which are shown a number of the brass stamps used to print the covers, together with the covers themselves and the water-color drawings from which the stamps were cut. Most elaborate is the stamp for the stout quarto, "The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood," designed by Mr. Howard Pyle. The stamps and covers by Mr. Edwards for "The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson," and by Mr. Birch for "The One I Knew the Best of All," are also conspicuous. The stamps and covers, and in some cases the drawings, are also shown of Stevenson's "Ballads," "The High Top Sweeting," "The Land of Poco Tiempo," "Sweet Bells Out of Tune," and "The Women of the French Salons." A beautiful water-color sketch is shown for the cover of Sir Edwin Arnold's "Japonica."

In forming any estimate of credit for an elaborate cover, the work of the die-cutters is an important factor. After the designers, these skilled craftsmen perform about all the hand labor that is done on a commercial cover, and

to their facile touch is due much of excellence in the finished book.

At a period when the "juvenile book" plays so important a part in the publisher's business, it is interesting to see the collection of covers made in this branch of the cover designer's work. It is undoubtedly true that many awful atrocities are committed every day in the name of juvenile book-covers, but none such offend the eye in this exhibition. The cloth books are fewer in number than the lithographed covers, but the work throughout is masterly. Perhaps Mr. Crane's cover for the "Wonder Book," and Mr. Pyle's cover for "Robin Hood" are most noticeable among the cloth covers. But in the field of lithographed covers, who shall choose? The Caldecott covers are a school of design by themselves, and one scarcely knows whether to prefer their portrayal of the affecting histories of "John Gilpin," "The Mad Dog," and all the rest, the large Kate Greenaway family, or the whimsically classical outlines of Walter Crane's "Pan's Pipes," "The Baby's Opera," and "The Baby's Own Æsop." Perhaps it is worth noting that lithographed covers have no vogue in America except on children's books, although an occasional attempt is made to apply them elsewhere.

The exhibition of cloth covers from France is

not large, nor is there anything shown of eminent merit. Most of these cloth covers are for folios, and seem frankly commonplace beside the artistic excellence of American designs. But the French paper covers—that is another story. Paris has been for centuries the center for fine special bindings, and the French publisher has not found that it served his purpose to make cloth commercial covers in any extended way. But he binds his books in the most ravishing of paper covers—they look like nothing so much as a lot of pretty girls all arrayed in fresh muslin frocks, magnificently unpretending, yet deliciously correct from the ruffle at the neck to the hem of the skirt. The colors of the paper and of the designs, the delicacy of the drawings, and the subtle spirit of the whole thing contribute to make these covers unrivaled in their class. To give examples is worse than useless; almost every one deserves separate scrutiny and applause.

In whatever direction the genius of Germany reaches its pinnacle, it must be confessed that it is not in the way of commercial bookbinding. The cases of covers which are shown to the American eye, at least, seem overburdened with meaningless ornament, heavy in design, and cumbered with curiously ineffective detail. Here symbolism rears its crested head unchecked, and in

eight or ten colors. The drawing is good in several instances, but the conceptions seem strained and the general effect disheartening. In strong relief to these bindings, the sober covers of American school-books and scientific texts lie modestly together in one corner of the show. Occasionally a bust of Pallas breaks out threateningly into view, but in general the covers are planned to rest the eye and stand daily handling.

The most casual look at this exhibition at the Grolier Club is enough to convince one that during the last decade the art of Commercial Bookbinding has outgrown all ideas of its originators. Where the art will stand ten years from now is as hard to guess as what Mr. Edison may invent between now and then.

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